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ABSTRACT

A study examined parent and family centers in schools. A survey was sent to 31 schools in the League of Schools Reaching Out that indicated the presence of a parent and family center. Data from the 28 schools responding to the survey yielded 8 dimensions on the functions of the centers: (1) definitions; (2) initiation; (3) names; (4) physical space; (5) staff; (6) funds; (7) hours of operation; and (8) activities. The survey found that all centers had "parent" or "family" in their name, indicating the importance of these places for parents to meet with each other, or with school staff. All but two centers were founded within the past 5 years, and the amount of physical space provided varied greatly. While many centers had or desired paid staff, most activities were directed by parent or teacher volunteers. Funding, hours of operation, and activities varied considerably. Indications are that parent and family centers both promote and support collaborative family-school relationships to enhance children's learning. (MDM)

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CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

PARENT/FAMILY CENTERS

Dimensions of Functioning In 28 Schools in 14 States

Vivian R. Johnson

Report No. 20 / September 1993

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Dimensions of Functioning in 28 Schools In 14 States

Vivian R. Johnson
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CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The nation's schools must do more to improve the education of all children, but schools cannot do this alone. More will be accomplished if families and communities work with children, with each other, and with schools to promote successful students.

The mission of this Center is to conduct research, evaluations, policy analyses, and dissemination to produce new and useful knowledge about how families, schools, and communities influence student motivation, learning, and development. A second important goal is to improve the connections between and among these major social institutions.

Two research programs guide the Center's work: the Program on the Early Years of Childhood, covering children aged 0-10 through the elementary grades; and the Program on the Years of Early and Late Adolescence, covering youngsters aged 11-19 through the middle and high school grades.

Research on family, school, and community connections must be conducted to understand more about all children and all families, not just those who are economically and educationally advantaged or already connected to school and community resources. The Center's projects pay particular attention to the diversity of family cultures and backgrounds and to the diversity in family, school, and community practices that support families in helping children succeed across the years of childhood and adolescence. Projects also examine policies at the federal, state, and local levels that produce effective partnerships.

A third program of Institutional Activities includes a wide range of dissemination projects to extend the Center's national leadership. The Center's work will yield new information, practices, and policies to promote partnerships among families, communities, and schools to benefit children's learning.

Abstract

This report on parent/family centers in schools is based on a survey sent to 31 schools in the League of Schools Reaching Out that indicated the presence of a parent/family center in the school. Data from the 28 schools responding to the survey yielded eight dimensions on the functions of the centers: 1) definitions, 2) initiation, 3) names, 4) physical space, 5) staff, 6) funds, 7) hours of operation, and 8) activities. These eight dimensions are discussed, and the activities dimension is examined within the Epstein (1992) typology of six types of family-school interaction.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The idea of a special place for parents in schools represents a significant symbolic and structural change in schools' relationships with families. Parent rooms or family centers, as these special places are usually called, are a feature of school restructuring that has received less attention than school-based management, for example, but are a development that require closer examination because they represent a profound change in the way educators view the role of parents in schools and the way parents view their role in their children's formal education.

Traditionally, educators have thought of parents' appropriate role as that of strong, mostly silent supporters of schooling. Expected to assist with homework, encourage children to work hard in school and sign and return forms quickly, parents were not wanted in schools except on invitation to open house, to pick up report cards, or assist with the bake sale. Other requests for parents' presence at school usually meant that a child was in trouble, academically or socially. In theory, this traditional attitude identifies "separate spheres of influence," based on the notion of separate contributions to society by families and schools (Epstein, 1992).

Changing Attitudes About the Role of Parents: Outsiders to Insiders

The traditional assumption is that schools were best run by educators who, as trained professionals, know best how to deliver educational services. Traditional attitudes about the role of parents in schools have changed dramatically during the last several decades. As American society has changed, educators are no longer certain that they can deliver educational services without help from parents, businesses, and the larger community.

Further evidence of profound change in traditional attitudes is seen in educators' calls for changes in basic school structures. Hierarchical and bureaucratic structural arrangements in schools, which seemed well designed to serve children and their families earlier in this century, fail to meet the needs of an American society which Donald Schon (1971) says is not currently a "stable state." New social arrangements and structures must be invented, Schon notes, in order to bring about continuing transformation of the society. Including parents in schools in their own space, in partnership with the schools, represents such a new social arrangement.

In providing a space for parents that is their own place to come and go as they determine, educators are symbolically changing the role of parents from outsiders (invited guests) to insiders (members of the team). No longer are parents asked to come to schools only for special occasions like open house or performances of their

children. Rather, parents are asked to join in the process of education by tutoring, monitoring lessons, accompanying field trips, planning activities, and governing schools. Teachers remain school professionals, but parents are more and more frequently asked to become collaborators in the schooling process.

It is important to note the evolution of this change, which has gained momentum over the past 25 years. A significant turning point occurred in public schools with the passage of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, because its Title I (now Chapter 1) program to increase educational opportunity for disadvantaged children of low-income families required both parental oversight and sign-off on programs implemented for their children. The next major change was often related to desegregation plans that mandated inclusion of parents in school governance on some type of school or parent councils. Following the publication of A Nation At Risk, these councils were often associated with reform efforts, and educators also sounded the alarm and issued increasing calls for parent participation to assist them in school reform and restructuring. During the past ten years, some reform and restructuring efforts have included establishing a special room for parents in an expanding number of schools throughout the country.

Just as the parent rooms or parent centers represent symbolic as well as structural changes in educators' attitudes about the role of parents in formal education, these spaces also signal changes in parents' attitudes about their role in schooling. No longer willing to leave schooling entirely to professional educators, parents are more likely to raise questions, request information, and participate in planning, governance, or fund-raising than they were in the first half of this century. As one parent noted in an interview, parents are partners with teachers and concern about their children's welfare requires that they be involved in schools. The establishment of parent or family Centers is an indication of a more formal partnership agreement because parental participation is structured into the school framework as a part of daily school life. In schools with effective parent centers, involvement is no longer simply a good idea; it has become an essential component of the schooling process.

Parent Information Centers and Parent/Family Centers

Parent or family centers in schools are different from parent information centers (PIC), another innovation becoming more common all across the country. The two differ in both origin and function. Parent centers are usually initiated by parents in consultation with principals and teachers or they are sometimes initiated by teachers or principals. They are located in or near, and usually serve, a particular school. Parent information centers, on the other hand, are offices that are centrally located in a community and set up by school departments to provide a range of information to parents about school assignments and district services. The difference is significant -- parent centers often represent a parent initiative and are usually operated by parents;

PICs represent a school department initiative and may or may not be operated by parents. Some PICs offer various types of parent training programs requested by parents; however, most PICs are primarily information centers and referral offices related to children's school assignments, especially in school desegregation plans (Glenn, et al., 1993).

In contrast to PICs, parent/family centers are primarily places where activities are determined by parents' requests. Much information is available related to parenting skills, educational and job opportunities, summer activities for children, child-care facilities, and demystifying schooling, including curriculum and the school bureaucracy.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This study of parent/family centers draws on the ecological perspective developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) for analysis and interpretation of relationships among various influences on human development, including families, schools and communities. Recently, Epstein (1987) has extended Bronfenbrenner's model to include a perspective on "overlapping spheres of influence." Epstein notes that the overlapping spheres can be either pulled apart or pushed together by the philosophy, experiences, or practices of families, schools or communities that affect the interpersonal forces in each environment. The theory of overlapping spheres of influence therefore encourages research on specific connections between schools and families such as parent centers. Within an ecological framework, relationships within structures that promote connections are especially significant, because the relationships can be examined between as well as within traditional settings such as home and school.

As noted above, traditional relationships between home and school are undergoing profound transformation: parents' traditional role of home supporter of school life is being replaced by an expanding role of partnership with professional educators who are requesting direct parental involvement in governance, management, and instruction in schools. A significant component of the changing parental role in formal education, parent/family centers represent a new organizational structure in schools which both promotes and supports transformation in school-home relationships.

Rationale for and Design of the Study

Before the study of perceptions can be undertaken, however, descriptive information must be available. A literature search revealed no literature indicating the number of parent/family centers throughout the country, nor are there descriptions of

the function of parent/family centers in developing and supporting school-family partnerships. This study describes and discusses eight dimensions of functioning of parent/family centers: definitions, initiation, variations in physical space and equipment, names, hours of operation, funding, staffing and activities.

Data for this report were gathered by use of a questionnaire sent to all schools in the League of Schools Reaching Out that had indicated on a 1991 survey the presence of a parent/family center. The League of Schools Reaching out is a network of more than 70 schools from Puerto Rico to Hawaii seeking to expand and improve children's learning through enhanced partnerships with families and communities. Initiated with two schools by the Institute for Responsive Education in 1988, the League has expanded as additional schools were selected to join the networking and exchange process in which information is shared regarding progress and concerns in developing and sustaining outreach activities to families and communities. At the time the survey was sent out, 31 of the 42 League of Schools Reaching Out respondents had parent/family centers.

Twenty-eight of the 31 schools with parent centers responded to the survey. Twenty-three are elementary schools, three are middle schools and two are junior high schools. All are public schools except one Catholic elementary school. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of schools responding in the following states: pCalifornia (7), Florida (1), Hawaii (1), Massachusetts (6) Minnesota (2), Missouri (2), New Jersey (1), New York (l), New Mexico (1). Ohio (2), Rhode Island (1), Virginia (1), West Virginia (1), Wisconsin (1).

Data Analysis

The survey data from 28 schools yielded eight dimensions on the functions of parent/family centers: 1) definitions, 2) initiation, 3)names, (4) physical space, (5) staff, (6) funds, (7) hours of operation, and (8) activities. Activities are further categorized within the typology of family-school interactions developed by Epstein (1992). The information base for each of these areas is supplemented by the use of previous survey data and reports collected by the League of Schools Reaching Out, as well as by interviews now underway with principals, teachers, parents, and other community participants in the schools.

Parent Centers: Creating a Special Place for Parents in Schools

Definitions

Parent/family centers are defined by schools as special places where parents and other family members meet, plan, and implement programs that they initiate or develop cooperatively with school staff. The Centers are places for parents to gather and decide what they will do and how to do it. Many parents see the centers as "a place of their own." A distinguishing feature of parent/family centers is that they are frequently the "support place" in schools where everyone feels welcome because school hierarchy doesn't interfere with relationships. Parents invite teachers, other school personnel and children into the centers to work with them.

Initiation of the Centers

The development of parent/family centers is a recent process in most schools. With the exception of one center that evolved from a PTA effort that began in 1924, and another center that began in 1979, all the centers began within the past five years. Most were started as a result of (1) parents' request for a place of their own, (2) teachers' and parents' request for space to work together more closely, (3) implementation of a district policy of parental involvement, or (4) principals' leadership.

Names

The names of these centers vary as well. While most are called Parent Centers, some are called Family Centers to indicate that all family members are welcome, and one is called a Parent/Teacher Center to demonstrate concern about partnership. Other names include Parent-Community Networking Center, Link, Parent Resource Room, Learning Lab For Students and Parents, Parent Volunteer Room, and Community Room.

Physical Space

The 28 schools vary greatly in the space provided for their parent/family centers. Some have generous space and occupy a former classroom or other full room. Many share space with other programs, or occupy a corner of another room such as the school library, gym, auditorium, or nurse's office. In one school, the parent center is an office next to the principal's office.

With an expanding school population in the San Diego schools, meeting space is a problem -- so a mobile parent center has been developed using a school bus with the seats removed. In addition to tables and chairs for meetings, the bus features copying and laminating equipment and materials for parents to make curriculum items to use at home with children to reinforce schools skills. In response to requests from elementary schools, the mobile parent center travels to a convenient spot near a school and parents gather on the bus in groups of 15 for meetings and workshops, or to make games, posters, charts or other materials to use at home with their children. The bus is also equipped with books and other materials about parenting, information about educational opportunities, and curriculum materials for home learning activities in which parents and children may engage.

At the Tomasita Elementary School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the space is called a Parent Room, rather than a "Center" because the space is insufficient for meetings. Materials are stored in a space which is shared by the custodian's supplies, physical education equipment, and other school program materials.

Lack of a "Center" has not deterred parents in the school from active participation. They find other meeting space within the school and use the Parent Room for storage, including storage of children's clothes in a clothing bank, and storage of a popcorn popper used in fund-raising. Once a month, parents make four hundred bags of popcorn which are sold to children as an after-school snack for twenty-five cents. Funds collected from the popcorn sale are distributed to each class in the school on a rotating basis and teachers, parents and children in the class decide how to spend the money. Funds have been used for field trips, classroom equipment, and materials for special projects such as science or art projects.

Despite space limitations, parent/family centers manage to be comfortable, welcoming environments. When sufficient space is available, the centers have a bottomless coffee pot, snacks, comfortable chairs, and often toys for pre-school aged children.

Staff

Most questionnaire respondents indicate the presence of paid staff or say they are fundraising for paid staff. Some centers are led by parent volunteers. The consensus is that paid, stable staff is required to coordinate consistent parental involvement. Most of the staff persons are parents or former parents from the schools, but about one-third of the centers have teachers as coordinators. The rationale in these cases is usually that teachers get other teachers involved in activities with parents, and that outreach is most successful when teachers reach out to parents. In addition to regular staff persons, most centers report that volunteers are available for special activities and events. A parent may come in to provide a few hours of child care while

other parents are in a meeting or accompanying a field trip. When needed for larger events, teachers as well as parents provide additional volunteer assistance in most centers.

Although most parent center volunteers are mothers, fathers are also very involved in a growing number of schools. An example of an outstanding volunteer father is Jesse Tello at the Daniel Webster School in San Francisco, California. Mr. Tello not only volunteers daily in the school himself in classrooms and on councils, but his concern about the lack of parental involvement in the school led him to go door-to-door in the neighborhood to find new volunteers. He was successful in getting many more parents to volunteer at least one hour a week in the school, and he also convinced drug dealers to leave the neighborhood and "...let the children get their education" as he later stated in an interview.

Funds

Funding for the centers varies considerably. A few were established with specific funds from a donor and funding is stable. Most, however, exist on some combination of fundraising activities such as carnivals and bake sales, as well as school funds, Chapter 1 funds, and donations. The largest expenditure is for staffing; the next highest is for books and other materials for parents. Refreshment and telephone costs consume the remaining funds. Furnishings and other equipment as well as toys and books are often donated. Nearly half of the centers have a telephone, television, and VCR.

Hours of Operation

Hours of operation also vary. Some centers are open a few hours daily; others are open only afternoons, or several days a week. A few are open before school begins to give parents a chance to get together when bringing children to school, and most centers are open for special school events during evenings and or weekends. The hours of operation depend on parents' needs, staffing, and the ebb and flow of school activities. Centers try to respond to working parents' schedules, so that breakfasts and evening activities are popular. Weekends present problems because schools are closed and many require special staffing and oversight arrangements for weekend use. Some parent/family centers have found ways to work through these problems, but most are still in the process of addressing this issue.

The hours of operation may increase at certain times of the year. For example, just before the holidays in December, or graduation in June, center activity becomes intense as large numbers of parents, teachers and community residents meet to plan, sew, cook, design, draw, paint and repair for school events. During these times, especially, centers may become production rooms for costumes for the school play,

graduation decorations, or signs and posters for special events. In the midst of this flurry of production, children may also receive tutoring, parents may be phoning other parents to share information as part of a telephone tree, teachers may drop in to request volunteers for classroom activities or field trips, and donors may bring items for a clothing bank.

Activities

Parent/family centers are most often used for meetings, workrooms, tutoring students, child care, information sharing, enrolling new students, and receptions before or following special events. Parent/family centers are often busy places. Most activities can be categorized within the typology of six types of family-school interaction developed by Epstein (1992), as discussed in the following sections.

Type I -- Basic Obligations of Families

This area represents ways schools help families meet their basic obligations for their children's health, safety, and development including:

- preparing children for school,
- getting needed health and social services for children and themselves,
- providing effective supervision and discipline, and
- providing home conditions that support learning and healthy development

All schools reported that their parent/family centers are used to provide parent information and nearly all centers conduct parent workshops or classes on a variety of topics in response to parental needs. The next two areas in which most assistance is provided to families are social service referrals and child care. More than half of the schools noted these types of assistance. About one third of the schools' centers have lending libraries offering books, audio tapes, videotapes and toys, in that order. One school also loans globes. About a third of the schools also coordinate home visits, translate materials from English to the language spoken at home, and also translate for parents attending meetings at schools. In addition, seven reported computer classes for parents, six reported health and nutrition classes and five reported adult education and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

Some schools are responding to the basic needs of families by providing some type of food program which allows families to purchase food at very low costs. Three schools are involved in SHARE or another type of food cooperative in which families can purchase food at very reduced prices. The Holland School in Boston, Massachusetts has an especially active program called "Fair Foods." For one dollar, families from the school neighborhood can purchase bags of food worth fifty dollars. Families buy as many bags as they need from selections which include fresh vegetables, rice, pastas and pastries. The "Fair Foods" groceries are available every

other week, and people who purchased food the previous time assist in preparing the bags for the next purchases. Several hundred families in the school participate in this program.

Another way that parent/family centers assist families with basic needs is by providing literacy and other training for parents. Only two schools reported having GED classes in which parents are preparing to obtain high school equivalency diplomas. The Miles Park School in Cleveland, Ohio has a large GED program with nearly 100 participants. Staffing is provided by the state Family Life Education Program and it is funded through vocational education. This is a significant collaboration because it demonstrates how a program funded to assist adults in literacy and other skills training can be combined with school programs to enhance parental involvement. This reduces the fragmentation of the delivery of services to families.

Individual schools reported a range of additional help for parents from their parent/family centers, including family counseling, drug prevention, parent peer and support groups, job counseling, nursing services, housing assistance, and a parent service exchange bank.

Type II -- School-Home and Home-School Communication

Type II in the Epstein typology concerns schools' basic obligations for two-way communications and information exchanges with families, including conferences, report cards, letters and telephone calls to and from the home, home visits, open houses and newsletters.

Parent/family centers often serve as the hub of school-home communication, and each center assists in improving connections between home and school through a variety of activities and services. In addition to translation services, telephone trees, home visits, information workshops and classes, receptions for open house and other school events, some parent/family centers have special liaison activities. In one school, kindergarten teachers visit all kindergarten children's homes during the school year. Home visits are also made to all new children entering the school. Most schools require parents to attend conferences to pick up report cards during at least one if not all marking periods. One school reports a homework hotline and another has a parent voice mailbox. Parent center activities are varied in time and type to accommodate parents' schedules and encourage greater home-school communication. Some schools try weekend or holiday activities for families. Others have events on weekdays, but try earlier or later hours before or after parents go to work. The O'Hearn School in Boston has a weekday breakfast each fall at which new parents are welcomed with pancakes and cheerful greetings from other parents, teachers and children. These events give families and teachers more opportunities to meet and exchange information.

Type III -- Volunteers and Audiences

This area represents ways that family members and other community people provide assistance as volunteers, as participants in school events, and as paid or unpaid workers in the school or classrooms.

Schools' responses to the survey showed that through the coordination of parent/family centers, families provide help for schools and in classrooms most frequently by participating on School-Parent Councils or other school governance bodies. (See Type V for discussion of parental participation in governance.) The next most common activity in which parents are involved is in sponsoring special events, including musical, sports events or parties. In the course of participation in governance and special events, parents are also involved in fund-raising for schools through sales, raffles, and donations. About 40% of the schools also reported that parent/family centers coordinate parent volunteers who supervise students in libraries, cafeterias and on playgrounds, serve as classroom aides, or accompany field trips. About one-fourth of the schools report that parents provide tutoring workshops, after-school tutorials or other types of instructional activities.

Individual schools reported that their parent/family centers coordinate a range of additional volunteer work by families, including photocopying materials for teachers, recycling cans and bottles on the campus, doing clerical work in the office, helping with school clean up, holding parent orientation, manning telephone trees, and serving parking lot duty.

Type IV -- Involvement in Learning Activities at Home

How do parents -- on their own or at the initiative of the school -- monitor and assist their own children's learning at home on learning activities that may be coordinated with children's classwork?

This is the area in which the schools report the least number of activities, while studies indicate that parents want to learn how to help their children with school work and that home visits are a useful means of supporting home learning (Johnson, 1991). A few schools report that home learning activities are encouraged through home visits, but only a few teachers make visits or send instructions to parents to assist them in monitoring homework. At the Tomasita School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, kindergarten teachers visit all children's homes by the end of the school year and leave books and other materials for parents to use with children. These home visits are coordinated by the school administration with the involvement of parent room staff in continuing communication with the families -- thus home visits are not an isolated event, but part of an integrated approach to family-school communication.

Type V -- Involvement in Governance, Decision Making, and Advocacy

This area focuses on involvement of family members in decision-making or advocacy roles through school councils, PTA/PTO, advisory committees, or independent parent or community organizations seeking to monitor or influence the school or advocate for children's interests.

Governance is the area in which the largest number of respondents noted parental participation in their schools. Seventy-five percent report that the parent/family center sponsors school decision-making meetings. Five of the schools also reported involvement in school-based management, so that some form of restructuring which includes parents seems to parallel increased parental outreach efforts coordinated through parent/family centers in the schools.

Type VI -- Collaboration and Exchanges with the Community

This area focuses on ways schools coordinate, integrate, or exchange services for children and families with community agencies, organizations, churches, youth groups, businesses and universities that share responsibility for children's development.

Most schools report some type of business, church, or other type of community partnership. Universities are mentioned less often than businesses. Lions Clubs, Rotary Clubs, police departments or divisions, military units, law firms, health centers, block associations, a musicians' association, and a local Red Cross were also mentioned as examples of school partners. The Miles Park School in Cleveland, Ohio has a special partnership with the Ford Motor Stamping Plant in which five men from Ford volunteer in classrooms and serve as additional black male role models in the school in a variety of activities.

Community outreach also includes the involvement of grandparents -- and the celebration of grandparents -- through the involvement of families in schools. There are "Grandparent Appreciation Days," foster grandparents as tutors, and grandparents who volunteer as classroom aides in addition to or in place of parents. Parent/family centers are places where the reality of extended caregiving to children, by caretakers other than biological parents, is both recognized and affirmed.

Within parent/family centers, school partners provide a range of assistance including tutoring, funding, equipment, supplies, participation in special events, mentoring and special programs such as career days. In addition to their ongoing business partnerships, many schools report that various neighborhood businesses provide food, equipment, or supplies for one special event such as a carnival, or a local newspaper might provide copies of papers for use in a class. Businesses or other organizations also supply materials for parent information and training, and

many police departments are actively involved with schools in substance abuse prevention programs. Although not all of the activities of school partnerships with businesses and other community participants are coordinated through parent/family centers, schools note that centers assist in coordinating those activities which involve families; and centers are often a meeting place for tutoring, planning, and social events involving other school-community collaboration.

A number of schools mentioned their hope of expanding community connections, especially in the area of social services, in order to better assist families with counseling, job training, adult education, or additional support services.

Conclusion

Analysis of survey data gathered in the first phase of the National Study of Parent/Family Centers provides an emerging profile of these dynamic gathering places in schools. These centers conduct or coordinate communal activities in support of the special needs of children, schools, families, and teachers in a rapidly changing society that is no longer a "stable state" (Schon, 1971). In contrast to the impersonal and bureaucratic features of schools that have stimulated reform and restructuring, parent/family centers provide a more personal and integrative element in the texture of school life. They represent an outstanding feature of school restructuring. No matter their size or location in the school, in these special gathering places, parents, teachers, school secretaries, custodians, nurses and counselors usually receive a cup of coffee, a smile, an opportunity to exchange information, and a chance to volunteer service or donate materials.

In the centers, strong reciprocal interpersonal relationships are formed in support of children's growth in modified structural arrangements where hierarchical distinctions among the roles of teachers, parents and other school staff are reduced. Instead of principals or teachers consistently in charge of developing agendas or initiating programs, parents or other community residents are more likely to assume these roles in the centers. Traditional role distinctions between the knowledge givers and the knowledge receivers are less clear in these new relationships. Instead of distinctions based solely on credentials and certification, role distinctions in parent/family centers are more likely determined by specific knowledge, skills or talent needed for a particular project or task, or personal time available and willingness to volunteer to chair a committee or lead a group. Indications are that parent/family centers both promote and support collaborative family-school relationships to enhance children's learning.

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